

TWO crucial errors by goalkeeper John Maskell saw Wycombe Wanderers drop two vital points in their bid for the Rothmans Isthmian League championship at Loakes Park on Tuesday night when they were held to a 2-2 draw against Walton and Hershham.

For Maskell, who has given his club yeoman service for some ten years, the game was a tragedy and gave more ammunition to those who feel the goalkeeper is past his prime. Undoubtedly, it was his two mistakes that allowed Walton to take a share of the spoils they scarcely deserved.

The first came 11 minutes into the second half when he pained down a high ball under pressure. Dave Morris retrieved the ball but was then brought to the ground by Maskell who was given no chance with the resulting spot kick. Error number two was, if anything, much worse.

Wanderers had pulled back from that penalty to 2-1 and had seemingly got their just reward for their efforts. Then Willie Smith was given far too much time and space, ran ten yards and fired in a speculative shot which skidded through Maskell's hands. That was in the 88th minute. There was no time to come back again.

As everyone knows, goalkeeper's errors always look far worse than any other players'. Tuesday was no different and yet Maskell must not shoulder all the blame.

Wycombe, totally dominant for the majority of this absorbing encounter, should have made enough chances count to outweigh the goalkeeper's errors. They didn't and that fact alone could have cost them the championship. The title race isn't over yet, but there is no doubt three points from a convincing win over Walton would have given the Blues a distinct psychological advantage over the major contenders. Bishop's Stortford and Hendon. As it is, Stortford could now overhaul Wanderers if they win all their

remaining matches, including Thursday night's trip to Hendon.

This game had everything. Brilliance, errors, four goals, a penalty, near misses and even Wycombe's first booking of the season. One thing it lacked, however, was consistent handling by the officials. Referee K. Underwood, in my view, marred a potentially excellent game of football. Some of his decisions were baffling and the booking of centre-half Dave Bullock looked eminently harsh.

The incident, which meant Wanderers lost their first penalty point of the term leaving only Hitching Town with a clean sheet, came in the 38th minute. Bullock was challenged by Russell Perkins as the two players went for the ball some 20

yards outside the Wycombe penalty area. Perkins tugged Bullock's shirt and in retaliation, the Blues centre-back returned the compliment. The referee, who had been barracked by the crowd from the start, immediately brought out his book and took Bullock's name.

I thought Bullock was unlucky. It was the first foul he had committed that evening, there was little danger of Walton scoring and there did not seem any need for the referee to make an example of a player to stamp his authority on the game. It was an upsetting decision for Wycombe, who pride themselves on their disciplinary record.

Wanderers made a surprise change for this game, dropping Keith Searle to the subs bench, moving Larry Pritchard up front and bringing in Phil Wood to midfield. Unfortunately, Pritchard could make little headway against one of the best defences in the league and after an hour, manager Brian Lee brought on Searle for Pritchard moving back into his normal midfield role.

It was noticeable in the first ten minutes of the game that Maskell seemed determined to stay on his line to deal with any

danger, twice missing the opportunity to cut out crosses. The first was wide but Billy Edwards' header in the sixth minute flew just over the bar.

Inevitably, it was a piece of vintage Tony Horsman skill that set the home crowd roaring. With 12 minutes gone, he turned on a half chance and sent it racing for the top corner of the net only to see Gary Bloom fist the effort over the crossbar. It was to be the first of many brilliant saves by the goalkeeper.

Wanderers, although not scoring themselves, seldom looked like conceding goals either. Walton's front three of Perkins, Tottman and Woffinden hardly got a sniff at the ball all evening. Somers and Connell were obviously missed.

The second half was held up while Bloom cleared his goal of toilet paper thrown by some children in the Wycombe crowd

but the matter became far more serious when two missiles were thrown later in the game. The referee stopped the match and asked for a loudspeaker announcement which threatened ejection from the crowd for the offenders.

When the football did get underway, Wood was the first to resume Wycombe's assault on the Walton net when, after failing with a couple of shots in the first half, he caught the ball on the volley following the breakdown of a corner, and sent it dipping towards the net, forcing Bloom to tip the ball over for the first of nine second half corners won by Wycombe. Walton had two, both in the first half.

At this stage Wanderers were still not clicking fully as a team.

They were by now winning enough of the ball from midfield but the front three were still not at their best and concerted pressure was not maintained on the Walton defence. As Wycombe were pondering how to overcome the problem, Maskell made the first of his errors, probably caused by inactivity.

Dave Sargent ballooned the ball high and hopefully into the Blues' penalty area. Perkins went up for the ball with Maskell, thereby preventing the 'keeper making a clean catch. But instead of punching the ball away, Maskell palmed it onto the ground to Morris. Maskell did well to block Morris' half-hit shot which followed, but then grabbed Morris' ankle and sent him tumbling. The referee gave the only decision possible in such a case and Morris himself sent Maskell the wrong way from the spot.

This was by no means a unique situation for Wanderers. They had been a goal down before and come back. But this time they needed to pressurise their opponents far more. To do this, they brought on Searle in the 58th minute. After 120 seconds' action, Searle should have scored.

Perrin challenged for a loose ball with Lambert inside the Walton box, and managed to get a touch. Bloom, off his line, was left stranded as Perrin's deflection rolled slowly towards the net with Searle right behind it, just watching it home — or seemingly so. The ball suddenly rolled against the upright, bounced out and was cleared away. Searle, who had ample time to tuck the ball home, presumably did not want to "poach" Perrin's goal and it cost Wycombe dearly.

After that, the chances came thick and fast with Wanderers mounting attack after attack on the Walton net. In the 72nd minute Horsman shaved the post with a free kick around the wall and then Bloom pulled off a spectacular dive to cut out a cross from Paul Birdseye, who

swerving viciously. But Bloom was equal to it and pushed the effort around the post. It was his best save of the night and he made many.

Still the bombardment continued. Wycombe could not be content with the 1-1 scoreline, they knew full well three points were imperative for this, their third last league match of the campaign. Then, to an explosion of excitement among the Wycombe fans, the Blues went ahead. Walton, for once slow to appreciate a moment of danger, allowed Searle the chance of a close range shot which he crashed into Bloom's body. The ball rebounded from the 'keeper and there was Mick Hollifield to get the scoring touch.

Wycombe, it seemed, had done it again. They left it very, very late against Ilford and had seemingly pulled it off again just when it mattered. They deserved what looked like their winning goal too. With an all-out effort they had managed to pull back against a most resilient defence and then they wasted it all, just two minutes from time.

In a similar situation many sides would have pulled everyone back for the last five minutes. Not Wycombe. They were still looking for a third goal when Willie Smith received the ball on the half way line and set off on a run in the 88th minute. He had made about 10 yards when he sent in a low shot which skidded along the ground. As the drive was from outside the penalty area there seemed little danger. But then, to Wycombe's horror and Smith's delight, Maskell failed to get his body behind the shot and the ball flew through his hands and hit the back of the net. It was a killer goal.

Having fought back so well before, Wanderers could not do it again and there was an ominous silence for the last two minutes of the match.

WYCOMBE: J. Maskell, P. Birdseye, K. Mead, D. Bullock, R. Grant, T. Reardon, P. Wood (sub K. Searle 58 mins), M. Hollifield, L. Pritchard, A. Horsman, S. Perrin.

WALTON: G. Bloom, D. Sargent, C. Lambert, D. Donaldson, W. Edwards, D. Lamb, W. Woffinden, R. Perkins, T. Tottman, R. Parkins, C. Woffinden. Sub C. Foskett (not used).

Referee: K. Underwood (Romford).
Half-time: 0-0. **Goalscorers:** Wycombe — Searle (78), Hollifield (83). Walton — Morris pen (56), Smith (82).
Official attendance: 3,524.
Approx. total attendance: 2,300.

By STUART EARP Wycombe Wanderers 2, Walton and Hershham 2